

**Myth or Fact?**

American popular culture features many mistaken notions about Native Americans. As a first step in learning about tribal people, look at some of the following common perceptions.

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**Myth:** With each census, fewer people identify themselves as Native Americans.

**Explanation:** Although many believe that Native Americans face extinction, U.S. Census Bureau figures show that the Native American population has approximately tripled since 1890.

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**Myth:** Most tribal nations are wealthy since they began operating casinos.

**Explanation:** Most tribes do not have gaming operations. In 1997, 10 tribes earned 56 percent of the gaming income. Most of the gaming tribes earn modest incomes.

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**Myth:** All tribes are federally recognized.

**Explanation:** Not all tribes are federally recognized. Today there are over 560 tribal governments, each one unique. "Recognition" is a legal term meaning that the United States recognizes a government-to-government relationship with a tribe and that a tribe exists politically in a "domestic dependent nation status."

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**Myth:** All Indian reservations are located west of the Mississippi River.

**Explanation:** Numerous Federal and State Indian reservations lie east of the Mississippi River, especially in the upper Midwest and Northeast. Michigan, Florida, and some New England states have experienced some of the most rapid population increases. However, the greatest numbers of reservations do lie west of the Mississippi River.

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**Myth:** Reservations are losing population as Indians move away.

**Explanation:** In 1990, 60 percent of American Indians lived either in tribal areas or surrounding counties. Of those in surrounding counties, 71 percent would prefer to return to the reservation. Cultural ties to tribal areas remain strong. Many Native Americans living in urban areas retain ties to their tribes and hope to move back when they retire.

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**Fact:** Many Indians speak tribal languages.

**Explanation:** Many Native American languages are still spoken, despite being forbidden in the past, particularly in compulsory boarding schools used to educate Indians in the late 1800s and early 1900s. To the extent they can, tribes are putting resources into reviving languages.

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**Myth:** Indians do not pay taxes.

**Explanation:** Individual Indians pay all the taxes that other citizens do, except for earnings from their own allotments or from income earned on reservations. Tribal income is exempt from federal taxes. In general, most courts have ruled against the imposition by states of taxes in Indian Country. Tribes may impose taxes on tribal and non-tribal residents on reservations.

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## Partnering Challenges

Like other U.S. citizens and local governments, American Indians and tribal governments may be eligible for Federal disaster assistance and other programs that benefit individuals and their communities.

Tribal communities present a special challenge to Government workers. For example:

- Sometimes the State and local emergency management network overlooks tribal governments.
  - Tribal cultures and traditions may conflict with work expectations and procedures.
  - Indian communities often mistrust representatives of the Federal Government.
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## Disaster Worker Challenges

Experienced disaster workers who have worked with tribes stress the need to be flexible and responsive.

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## Tribal Considerations

Many tribes are new to emergency management and disaster assistance. Some things you should consider are:

- Tribal communities traditionally care for their own people in disasters.
- Tribal leaders may not know how to ask for Federal disaster assistance.
- Tribal people may see FEMA's role as interference with tribal culture.
- Tribal people often do not distinguish among government agencies.

Above all, remember that good relations depend on respect for tribal leadership structures and decision-making processes.

Tribal viewpoints reflect a range of experience with emergency management and with FEMA.

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## Conclusion

This lesson presented:

- The facts behind some common notions about American Indians.
  - Viewpoints of disaster workers and tribal individuals about working together.
  - Potential challenges dealing with tribal nations.
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